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ABSTRACT

This article examines so-called "alternative schools," taking care to define precisely what is meant by this designation. There are many types of alternative education available to the public, including those programs intended for special-education students, advanced-placement students, and home-schooled children. The first alternative schools emerged in the 1960s as urban districts tried to help struggling minority and poor youngsters succeed in school. Today, these schools' philosophies, purpose, and facilities vary widely, but they typically serve 200 or fewer students and have a greater staff/student ratio than regular public schools. The types of alternative schools include those that try to reform unruly or adjudicated adolescents and those that try to change the school experience and the way students think about school. A problem with programs that try to rehabilitate students is that by targeting difficult students, equity in the schools might be threatened by the segregation of minorities, the poor, and the disabled. A criticism of schools that try to change the entire school experience, such as the Waldorf Schools and Harmony Schools, is that they adopt methods without fully understanding the impact of these approaches. It is recommended that alternative educators gain more control over who attends and that they recruit a more diversified student body. (Contains 24 references.) (RJM)

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Trends and Issues

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Alternative Schools

By Margaret Hadderman

Devoting a separate category to "alternative schools" is somewhat inexact, as every option discussed under School Choice represents an alternative to conventional or mainstream public education. Prospective founders of magnet and charter schools would surely profit by revisiting surviving alternative schools' early experiences (Dunn 2000), whether based on Waldorf, Montessori, Summerhill, or more pragmatic philosophies. To this list, Daniel Drake (2000) would add several "responsive" public-school varieties, such as Comer Process schools, full-service schools, immersion programs, schools-within-schools, and middle schools.

Schooling alternatives have existed for centuries in many nations. By the end of the 1800s, public schools in the U.S. were flourishing. Many children attended church-sponsored schools; "some affluent families educated their children at expensive and exclusive boarding schools or at local private schools" (Koetke 1999).

Koetke (1999), a classroom teacher, notes the immense variety embedded in the term *alternative education*, which today can denote "programs for court-adjudicated youth, advanced placement students, special education or disabled students, or home-schooled children."

While absolute numbers of currently operating alternative schools remain elusive, state legislatures are increasingly funding alternative education programs for children who have difficulties adjusting to more traditional school settings. Between 1994 and 1997, for example, five states (Arizona, Illinois, Oklahoma, Oregon, and North Carolina) passed such legislation (Crampton 1998). Texas, Arkansas, and Wisconsin were pioneers in establishing alternative school settings for troubled high-schoolers.

Purposes of Early Alternative Schools

During the 1960s, the first schools known as "alternatives" emerged in the private and, ultimately, the public sector in predominantly urban and suburban areas (Raywid 1999). According to Raywid (1999), urban programs tried to help struggling minority and poor youngsters succeed in school; early suburban initiatives "became innovative programs seeking to invent and pursue new ways to educate."

Open education "was part of a progressive alternative schools movement that began in the late 1960s,... peaked in the early 1970s," and was gradually overshadowed by the back-to-basics movement in the late 1970s (Dunn 2000). These schools frequently lacked inside walls and featured field trips and active, hands-on learning opportunities.

Alternatives springing up in the 1970s and 1980s included democratic schools stressing citizenship and student power, community schools focused on

moral development, and "'experimental' programs such as Foxfire in rural Rabun Gap, Georgia" (Charlie Clark 2000). Many once-thriving open and "free-form" schools eventually closed. Others adopted more conventional curricula and practices (Dunn 2000, Charlie Clark 2000).

The list of surviving alternatives founded between 1969 and the early 1970s includes Cambridge's Pilot School; Philadelphia's Parkway School; Scarsdale Alternative School; Washington, D.C.'s School Without Walls; Arlington, Virginia's H-B Woodlawn (Charlie Clark 2000); Bloomington, Indiana's Harmony School (Goodman and Kuzmic 1997); and Charlotte, North Carolina's Irwin Open Elementary School (Dunn 2000).

Far from being passing fads, alternative-school philosophies and practices continue to flourish in private- and public-school settings. According to Raywid (1999), alternative-school formats are being adapted to many purposes: reducing juvenile crime and delinquency, preventing school vandalism and violence, deterring dropouts, desegregating classrooms, and enhancing school effectiveness.

Characteristics of Alternative Schools

Although educational philosophies, purposes, and facilities vary widely, alternative schools share certain characteristics. They are usually smaller (under 200 students), or consist of smaller units within a larger school, and have a greater staff/student ratio than conventional schools (Koetke 1999). There is generally more opportunity for individualized instruction, use of unconventional approaches and organizational structures, and a "sense of community and personal caring" (Koetke 1999, DeBlois 2000).

Alternatives are typically student-centered, have a noncompetitive learning environment that measures improvement and shuns comparisons between students, and have instructional programs stressing a specific philosophy or school culture (Koetke 1999).

Types of Alternative Schools

Raywid (1999) divides contemporary alternative schools into three types, based on their institutional mission: changing either the student, the school, or the entire educational system.

Changing the Student

Schools in the first category, those designed as "last-chance" placements for unruly or adjudicated adolescents facing expulsion, come in at least two varieties. Schools may be either openly punitive or "highly structured," as in alternative education programs for disruptive youth funded by Texas' 1995 Safe Schools Act (Bickerstaff and others 1997), or therapeutic and remedial, as in Lexington, Kentucky's technology-infused Central Alternative High School serving 100 adjudicated youth (Koetke 1999). In most instances, placements are

temporary and sometimes involuntary. Students who "shape up" are allowed to return to their "home" schools.

Lately, alternative placements for middle-school and even elementary students are being explored. An innovative program at Passaic (New Jersey) Public Schools has succeeded in cutting suspensions and reducing the number of disciplinary incidents at the district's middle school. The alternative school is located at nearby Felician College, where students are mentored by college students as part of a big brother/big sister project (Tomczyk 2000).

The St. Joseph (Missouri) Schools used a state grant to create an alternative Elementary Management School for aggressive youngsters that emphasizes behavior-management training aimed at improving students' social skills and returning them to regular classrooms (Henley and others 2000). Early results on the Burkes Behavior Rating Scale "indicate a general pattern of improvement, with 50 percent of the students showing improvement in all measured areas." Returning students have had fewer disciplinary referrals or suspensions and have improved academically.

A Florida study shows that improvement is rare in punitively oriented programs (Raywid 1999). In therapeutic programs, students' behavior and academic performance often regress when they return to more conventional school settings. Problems can emerge from segregating behaviorally challenging students from others and from inadequate funding of needed resources.

Changing the School Experience for Students

In stark contrast to alternative programs that seek to change students are alternative environments that aim to change school and the way students experience school. These are "often highly innovative schools with novel curricular and instructional approaches and atypically positive school climates" (Raywid 1999).

The nation's most famous example is probably Central Park East Secondary School (CPESS), in East Harlem, New York (Raywid 1999). CPESS features a nontraditional "less-is-more" curriculum, inquiry-based instruction, exhibition/portfolio evaluation methods, and a "flat" governance system headed by a teacher director. The graduation rate is 90 percent; 97 percent of graduates go on to college (Raywid 1999).

Schools offering a "high-engagement academic curriculum" for able and/or alienated students desiring greater challenge also fit Raywid's second category. According to Professor Daniel Drake (2000), high-engagement schools are generally the most successful alternatives. They generally retain students until graduation and "adopt policies and practices that provide close working relationships among teachers and allow time for regular discussions of students' progress."

Career academies such as Fremont High School, in Oakland, California, and technology-oriented high schools, such as Tallahassee's Florida University School, are further examples of successful alternative-school offerings for adolescents. The idea behind career academies, which often follow a school-

within-a-school format, is enabling students to visualize "more direct connections between education and their own futures" (Gehring 2000). Some experts believe constructing a system of meaningful credentials and applied-learning standards (as the basis of mastery certificates in academic foundations and industry-recognized skills) will more effectively prepare high-school students for both college and the workplace (Porter and others 2001).

However, academies and stand-alone technology schools differ from vocational schools in retaining an essentially academic curriculum that does not lead directly to jobs after graduation. Although these schools would not suit everyone and have yet to improve student test scores, they offer a model for downsizing comprehensive high schools and for focusing educators and students on the same theme.

In a few communities, "classic underachievers" in search of something different have some interesting choices. One alternative is the Scotland School for Veterans' Children, in Scotland, Pennsylvania (Koetke). Founded in 1895 as a boarding school for the state's Civil War soldiers' orphans, this state-funded school now educates students (each sponsored by a U.S. military veteran) who haven't succeeded outside of a residential setting. The school houses its highest and best-behaved achievers in "honor suites" with Internet connections. Emphasis is on regular and technical college-prep materials, computer-assisted instruction, and hands-on projects.

A truly grassroots initiative may be found at the Center for Appropriate Transport (CAT), in Eugene Oregon, which hosts a dozen bike-related enterprises and a private alternative school serving mostly "bored and bummed-out" teenagers (Wind 2000). Interested youth aged 12 to 18 can be referred by the school district or sign up for a CAT course as an elective. Classes on various subjects, including welding and personalized bicycle repair, run two or three hours, and are taught by administrator and transportation-activist Jan VanderTuin.

The program is certified and publicly funded; VanderTuin's chief complaint is that district officials want to send him only problem kids. He claims an 80 percent success rate with these teens, but believes more kids in the district, including homeschoolers, should be made aware of CAT and other private alternatives in the area.

Changing the Educational System

According to Raywid (1999), "early efforts at using alternatives as a means of introducing systemwide change" (in Minneapolis, Tacoma, and Berkeley) have generated numerous options and some positive signs of success. Seeing small schools and innovative alternatives as sharing the same characteristics, she says "the small schools and schools-within-schools movement occurring in the nation's cities today is actually a test of whether small alternatives can survive in large systems" and can adapt those systems to support such innovation.

Harmony School's Contributions to Systemwide Improvement. According to two University of Indiana education professors, "bringing a

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progressive pedagogy to conventional schools" is daunting, but not impossible (Goodman and Kuzmic 1997). During the early 1990s, Goodman and Kuzmic spent a year studying Harmony, a private, democratically oriented school in Bloomington, Indiana, committed, in part, to helping conventional schools reconceptualize their children's education. Harmony students are from widely diverse backgrounds, with over 85 percent receiving full or partial scholarships.

For these observers, the most serious challenge to incorporating alternatives is U.S. schools' ethos of individualism, which "supports a competitive, isolated learning environment and an organizational/curricular structure leading to social conformism." School subjects are usually taught as separate disciplines, classmates' ideas are considered irrelevant to one's own learning, and "students are painfully aware of their 'standing' in the class." Ironically, early alternative education in the United States also stressed personal liberty in an anti-authoritarian context; the need to promote each child's originality or thoughtfulness and to educate children "to develop compassion, altruism, cooperation, civic responsibility, and commitment to work for the general welfare of our planet" were neglected (Goodman and Kuzmic 1997).

More recently, Goodman and Kuzmic have identified many alternative schools that are trying to 'balance the values of individuality and community." Harmony, for example, has moved from an individualistic orientation in the 1970s to a "connectionist pedagogy." This educational approach tries to "cultivate each child's unique individuality" while helping children understand how "life on this planet is deeply interconnected and interdependent." In 1990, Harmony School expanded its educational role by establishing an Office for Outreach Services and an Institute for Research.

Between 1990 and 1996, Harmony worked with almost 100 reform-minded schools across the nation to address necessary shifts in perspectives, understandings, and ideologies before alternative practices can be adopted. Public schools have profited from many of Harmony's "connectionist" ideas: social bonding (creation of a "society of intimates" via camping trips, picnics, secret friends, and other rituals); a socially conscious, teacher-created curriculum (free of state mandates and instructional packages); and a learning environment that balances freedom with responsibility. The most responsive public-school educators are those who "recognize the inherent value of transforming schools into learning communities" (Goodman and Kuzmic 1997).

Waldorf Schools and the Rippling Effect. The Waldorf schools, founded by German educator Rudolf Steiner in 1919, have contributed an idea that is making waves in K-3 education. Looping, the practice of "having general classroom teachers advance with their students year by year," is staging a comeback. Educators are realizing the advantages of extended teacher-student relationships and intellectual accountability for student learning, progress, and well-being (Uhrmacher 1997).

Uhrmacher (1997) points out some problems that emerge when using borrowed educational practices, such as looping, outside their original context. Some Waldorf educators are appalled at such borrowing, insisting "their ideas only make sense in a system that embraces their anthroposophical world view."

Other Waldorf educators believe an idea like looping is transferable, if there is some motivating rationale or if teachers are willing to change the "ecology of schooling" (curriculum, pedagogy, school structure, evaluation, and intentions).

According to Uhrmacher (1997), Waldorf-style looping would require a less "stop-and-go" instructional ambience than regular classroom teachers and students are accustomed to. Along with extended relationships go extended learning activities, such as "main lesson" books resembling highly decorative medieval texts created by students attempting to summarize what they have learned.

Uhrmacher (1997) notes that using these books effectively means changing the curriculum to include more visual images. The books' borders and drawings represent a way of knowing that must be incorporated into evaluation schemes. If non-Waldorf teachers do not change the curriculum to accommodate these books, children may view their pictures as only embellishments. A culture of efficiency or of curriculum segmentation would nullify Waldorf learning goals.

Problems and Prospects

In an Appalachia Educational Laboratory policy brief, Soleil Gregg (1998) identifies three problems with creating separate alternative schools for students with behavior problems. Focusing on problem students may mask or overlook failings in the larger system. Also, programs targeting certain groups of individuals divert funds and other resources from everyone else. Finally, targeting difficult students may threaten equity by segregating poor, disabled, and minority students in alternative settings. Punitive rationales may actually undermine efforts to improve learning or behavior and compromise system equity (Gregg).

Susanna Ort, an observer of New York City's schools, lauds some schools' experimental practices; she also notes that too frequently, alternative-school students are stuck with old textbooks, boring workbooks, humdrum tasks, and limited expectations from teachers (Koetke 1999). Too often, alternative schools are viewed as "dumping grounds" or underfunded "warehouses" for difficult students, teachers, and even principals.

Tom Gregory (2001) supports these observations, noting that "alternative schools are often treated as second-class citizens by their districts" and can find themselves in "weak political positions" that encourage them to maintain a low profile and endure misunderstandings by colleagues and district administrators. For Gregory and others, turning alternatives into "soft jails" is not going to solve the problem of reaching unsuccessful, alienated youngsters.

On the plus side, an essay by Robert DeBlois (2000) argues passionately for establishing well-funded alternative schools of all varieties to counteract the alienation, impersonality, and social conformity characterizing most large, comprehensive high schools. Many towns and cities "have numerous choices for worship, entertainment, and shopping, but only one choice for the public education of adolescents." Astounded by Columbine High School's "sheer size" in aerial views after the shootings, DeBlois (an alternative-school director) echoes researchers' findings that small schools "are places where students get more

attention, perform better, and are happier." Kids of all talents and personalities have greater opportunities to fit in.

Economies of scale, DeBlois (2000) notes, are failing to pay expected dividends. Educators' attempts to remedy flaws in the system by creating smaller groupings within large schools come with a high price tag. Many students targeted by such innovations may remain unserved because they are not joiners. Other "hidden" costs of large schools include extra funding for students requiring a fifth year to graduate and social-service programs to serve dropouts who cannot find employment.

Serving alienated kids or those needing something different should not be considered an optional responsibility of schools (DeBlois 2000). According to one expert, "what a youngster who doesn't thrive in one school environment needs is another environment"(Raywid 2001). According to Raywid (2001), standardized schooling has severe limitations, and establishing only one "straightening-out center" (whether termed an "alternative," "opportunity," or "second-chance" school) is useless. The research-verified formula for a good education—"small, personalized schools offering authentic learning and producing student engagement—is essential if we are serious about enabling unsuccessful youngster to become successful" (Raywid 2001).

Incentives could take the form of state or federal startup grants; charter-school legislation could fuel establishment of small alternative schools (DeBlois 2000). Career academies can often garner business support, and innovative private alternatives, such as the Center for Appropriate Transport program described above, may qualify for district funding. DeBlois believes alternative schools would prove invaluable in violence-reduction efforts, since "a child would find it hard to go through even a portion of the day without some meaningful contact with an adult."

Alternative Pathways to Success: Some Recommendations

Arguing that alternative schools could play a pivotal role in revitalizing (and downsizing) the American High School, Tom Gregory (2001) targets common practices in public alternative schools that reinforce their "second-class citizenship" (see above) and retard progress toward that goal.

Regarding people issues, many alternative educators need to gain more control over who attends, recruit a more diversified student body (not only those with behavior problems), control students' time of entry, and recruit appropriate teachers (not those banished from regular schools). Since "the business of alternative schools is to create powerful, engaging programs that stretch students in ways they never envisioned," alternatives need to define themselves accordingly and develop unique programs, instead of operating as "another track of their big sister schools' programs."

According to Gregory, today's big high schools are dinosaurs that are successful only with an elite group of students; everyone else requires a different delivery system resembling that embodied in "our best alternative schools."

There are equity and parity issues that must be addressed, such as rundown facilities and insufficient resources. After tracking alternatives in half the states for over twenty-five years, Gregory personally knows of "only three buildings in the country that were actually designed and built for the alternative schools they now house." This situation must change, since alternatives need new forms of space and a fair share of infrastructure resources (not simply funding for teacher salaries) to educate their students appropriately.

Alternatives also need to build in program integrity and completeness and rely on graduation for closure, instead of sending newly productive kids back to an unsupportive, big-school ambience. Gregory says alternative educators should not hesitate to use brashness, effrontery, and subversive behavior as weapons for jumpstarting the change process.

Sharing Gregory's and Raywid's concerns about equity and diversity, Jerry Conrath (2001) believes "alternative education can become a catalyst for America' s unrealized hopes" by "helping young people overcome their most debilitating handicaps: the rampant pessimism, the failure to trust in effort, and the lack of confidence in our institutions due to generational poverty."

For Conrath, the secret weapon for developing successful youth is to teach them internal self-control and the value of effort in the face of adversity. Alternative educators can't guarantee success for every youngster (since they do not control family and economic circumstances), but they can promise to aid and encourage a struggling student in whatever way possible.

Alternative schools must lose their punitive stigma and adopt more open-door policies that welcome all school community members and attract interested students, according to an alternative high school director in Indiana (McGee 2001). Graduates should not be ashamed to list an alternative-school experience on their employment resumes or college applications.

Hamilton Alternative School's "Dangerous Minds" image, complete with visions of druggies, gangstas, and social outcasts, partly evaporated after reporters visited classrooms and shadowed "typical" students pursuing varied learning activities in a warm, inviting environment (McGee 2001). The school is well-funded and -appointed, but has had mixed success, as only half the student body completed the 1999-2000 school year. Some students could not be reached or engaged by Hamilton's programs. McGee's experience there convinced him that "options-loaded" alternative schools are so necessary that they should have more inviting names and identifiable missions.

Debra Meier, a well-known leader in New York City's (public-sector) small-schools movement, argues that students at the Central Park East schools she created in the mid-1970s are as at-risk as those in larger public schools, but "they are more likely to get a high school diploma and go on to successful college careers" (Meier 2000). She says, "schools for low-income students are more successful when they are small, when parents and teachers are together by choice," when schooling approaches are strong, coherent, and community-

minded, and when adults use their authority to make major decisions—all possible "inside the public sector, without charters, vouchers, or privatization."

Meier also believes the assessments that most small schools rely on (oral defenses, portfolios, and exhibitions) are more reliable indicators of future real-life success than the standardized tests used to evaluate students' progress in most schools. Meier's observations and experiences are reflected in the practices of alternative-school educators in both private and public sectors.

Early College Connections

Thanks to a growing number of cooperative programs involving schools and colleges, alternative placements do not have to be confined to K-12 classrooms. The University of California and California State University System "are working with school districts as never before to boost the readiness of minority students for academic work" at the college level (Maeroff and others 2000).

Similar partnerships in El Paso, Texas, and Memphis, Tennessee, seek to replicate the success of New York City's Middle College High School. This concept attempts to equalize opportunities for high-risk youngsters, as in its prototype—the City University of New York's LaGuardia Community College (Maeroff and others 2000).

Two other New York City programs are noteworthy. In June 2001, New York City's Board of Education approved Bard College's plan to start a public "early college" that would allow students to bypass a high-school diploma and earn an associate-arts degree (Reid, June 13, 2001). Students at the new Bard school in Annandale-on-Hudson would be taught a liberal-arts college education by professors with deep connections to their subject matter. Students (ninth- and eleventh-graders first) will be admitted on the basis of application, interviews, and portfolios (not standardized test scores). Funding would come from state, local, and privately raised dollars.

A four-year-old partnership between Harlem's Frederick Douglass Academy (80 percent African-American) and Ithaca College in upstate New York is also reaching out to youngsters who might never have considered going to college (Gehring 2001). Small groups of middle-schoolers are bused to graduation ceremonies, musical programs, and campus treasure hunts, while older kids attend math and computer programs at Ithaca during summer and work with Ithaca faculty members at their own school—adding up to enriching experiences for all concerned.

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